JERUSALEM PAPERS

TWO YEARS INTO THE WAR: ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC RECKONING

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After more than two years of a war that has been arguably the most complex conflict in Israel's history, we need to understand what has happened so that we can begin to sketch what should come next. When the guns of war finally fall quiet—and I am not convinced that the American declaration of its end is not premature—we will have to decide how to shape the path ahead.

I aim to answer three central questions, and along the way I will inevitably touch on other issues that, in my view, are less important for the purposes of this paper.

A. What was the strategic background on the eve of the war, and why did the war break out when it did?
B. What were the main moves of the war when viewed from above, and what logic guided them—in plain terms, *what was the strategy* that directed the State of Israel?
C. What are the main (and preliminary) lessons from the circumstances of the war's outbreak and from its course?

THE BACKGROUND TO THE WAR

Under Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, Iran decided to destroy Israel and treated this goal with absolute seriousness. The leadership in Tehran devoted thought, effort, and vast sums of money to this mission. It laid down a strategy and a timetable, while its executive arms, foremost among them the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, carried it out through the Quds Force and other branches of the IRGC. In practice, Tehran took concrete steps both inside Iran and across the Middle East to implement this strategy in cooperation with various groups and states that chose to work with it.

One European leader, who met with the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, later shared an illustrative anecdote: he was surprised that one of the Iranian leader's first questions was, *"Why are you not helping the effort to destroy Israel?"* For Khamenei, this was a top priority, and he was actively seeking partners to advance this goal.

This Iranian strategy formed the framework that has guided Iran's actions toward Israel over the past forty years. The Middle East on the eve of the war cannot be understood without recognizing that it was shaped, in large part, by Iran's sustained efforts—and that this strategy is what ultimately led to the war.

Iran built its strategy on three pillars and advanced each one in parallel, independently and on a wide scale.

The first and arguably the most important pillar was the creation of a strategic umbrella; in other words, the *nuclear pillar*. Israeli military intelligence identified the Iranian nuclear project in the first half of the 1990s. Since then, Iran has advanced mainly in uranium enrichment while delaying the weaponization stage—out of caution and to avoid providing a pretext for attacking the project.

The nuclear umbrella was meant to enable Iran to pursue its plan for a *Shi'ite empire*, the core of its vision for the future Middle East and a stepping stone toward global influence. This empire was expected to arise, among other things, over the ruins of Israel; but the Sunni Arab states were also expected to acknowledge Iran's superiority and leadership, thereby correcting what, in the Shi'ite view, was a 1,400-year-old injustice.

Over the years, Israel succeeded in delaying the timeline for the project's completion, but Iran continued to advance it with determination. On the eve of the war, Iran possessed uranium enriched to 60 percent in quantities that—if it were to complete the enrichment cycle and convert highly enriched uranium into metallic form—would suffice for more than five bombs. On the eve of the

war, and during it, Israeli intelligence assessed that significant progress was also being made in weaponization, bringing very close the moment when "tomorrow would be too late."

The second pillar, which was less familiar to the public until the Israel–Iran war, was Iran's drive to become a missile power, possessing many thousands of ballistic missiles capable of reaching Israel with warheads of roughly one ton that can cause immense destruction. Iran also had an ambitious vision to eventually acquire intercontinental launch capability, reaching as far as the United States.

Iran assessed that Israel would not be able to cope with such a volume of missiles—neither economically (an Arrow interceptor costs far more than an Iranian missile) nor operationally, because Israel would run out of interceptors long before Iran exhausted its stock of surface-to-surface missiles. Moreover, even Israel's most advanced missile defense systems are not infallible. Heavy damage to the Israeli home front was therefore expected regardless, since Iranian missiles carry large warheads and some were designed to cause extensive environmental destruction by dispersing submunitions across a wide area in addition to the main blast.

The advantage of the missile pillar lay in the fact that building it did not violate any international agreement—unlike the nuclear project—so it could not serve as legitimate grounds for attacking Iran. Even the 2015 nuclear deal reached between the Obama administration and Iran imposed no restriction on Iran's missile development, which accelerated significantly over the past decade. (A UN Security Council resolution prohibiting the manufacture of missiles designed to carry nuclear warheads did exist, but it was effectively meaningless, and Iran ignored it entirely.)

The third pillar was the "Ring of Fire" around Israel. It is perhaps the most sophisticated and original of the three pillars, and it is the one that directly shaped the outbreak of the war in October 2023 and its early stages, up to the strike in Iran.

Iran conceived and executed a concerted effort to build a powerful "Ring of Fire" around Israel. This ring included organizations founded or fully controlled by Iran—such as Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq. In addition, despite disagreements (particularly over the Syrian civil war), Iran also cultivated groups that retained a degree of independence and were distinctly Sunni rather than Shi'ite—namely, Hamas in Gaza and in Judea and Samaria.

In the original vision developed by Qassem Soleimani, Iran aimed to build an independent force in Syria that would be no less powerful than Hezbollah in Lebanon. Shi'ite militias were also expected to operate in southern Syria and western Iraq, alongside the Houthis in Yemen—although the Houthis primarily served Iran's needs in the Persian Gulf.

Iran's success in turning Hamas—and even more so Hezbollah—into *terror armies*—terrorist organizations with clear military capabilities—was undeniably a strategic shift in the scale of the threat these groups posed. Few armies in the world possess rocket and missile launch capabilities on the scale that Hamas and Hezbollah had or an underground system as extensive as the one used by Hezbollah and, even more so, by Hamas.

Faced with this transformation, the IDF was forced to confront complex capabilities that required a parallel mode of operation: simultaneously addressing classic terror tactics (IEDs, kidnappings, fighting from within civilian areas, and the use of civilian facilities) and countering clear military capabilities (organic units up to brigade level; centralized intelligence including cyber collection; anti-tank missiles; concentrated fire at short and long ranges; UAVs and drones).

The architects of this strategy in the Iranian leadership and the Quds Force envisioned Iran controlling this entire system from afar: building it, coordinating its activities, and operating it like an orchestra whose conductor sits behind the scenes in Tehran, directing events according to an Iranian score.

Iran assigned the "Ring of Fire" two strategic roles.

According to the Iranian vision, these organizations would grow stronger with Iran's support until their combined capabilities—activated according to a timetable set by Iran and backed by Iran—would enable the destruction of Israel. At the heart of this idea lay the assumption that as long as the fighting remained between Iran's "proxies" and the State of Israel, Iran itself would stay outside the campaign and unharmed while retaining enormous power in the form of thousands of missiles capable of reaching Israel. Iran would decide when the right moment had come to join the war to ensure Israel's collapse, at a time when Israel would already be facing a massive barrage of ballistic missiles alongside fierce fighting against the proxies raiding its territory and attacking it from all sides.

It must be acknowledged that there was logic to Iranian thinking. Anyone who imagines an October 7-style assault not only from Gaza but simultaneously from Lebanon, Syria, and Judea and Samaria—and perhaps also from Jordan and within Israel itself—can grasp the magnitude of the challenge. This is before even considering thousands of missiles from Iran striking Israel at a critical moment in a multi-front war, when the country would be most vulnerable along its borders.

In Iran's broader strategic concept, the "Ring of Fire" had a second role. Until the moment it was activated to strangle Israel and bring about its collapse, it was meant to serve as Iran's deterrent against Israel—preventing Israel from striking Iran to thwart the nuclear program. It was clear that, given the strength of the Ring of Fire, any Israeli decision-maker contemplating an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would have to ask whether Israel was prepared to face not only Iran but also Iran's proxies, positioned around Israel and ready to act on Iran's orders in the event of an attack.

Indeed, the Iranian concept was not baseless. Israel's longstanding reluctance to act in Lebanon, even when fully justified—as in the case of the Hezbollah tent

erected on the Israeli side of the Hermon slopes—demonstrates this clearly. There is no doubt that over the years this consideration—the need to confront Hezbollah and Hamas as part of any war with Iran—deeply deterred Israeli decision-makers whenever a strike on Iran was discussed. This deterrent effect only grew stronger as Hezbollah and Hamas became more powerful, more sophisticated, and acquired new capabilities—each on its own, and even more so together.

On the eve of the war, Iran and its various proxies believed they were at a very advanced stage of preparation and force buildup. Their confidence grew that the "axis," if it were to act in unison, had the power to eliminate the State of Israel—a belief reflected in communications among the axis members. A "countdown clock to Israel's destruction" ticked publicly in "Palestine Square" in the heart of Tehran. Preparations for war against Israel appeared increasingly concrete and pointed to an achievable outcome. Although no specific dates were discussed, the sense of capability of the axis was evidently very strong.

It is worth noting an important point here: the Iranians failed to build the force they intended to deploy in Syria due to the *mabam*, the "campaign between the wars," that Israel pursued persistently and continuously since late 2012. In retrospect, this failure was significant in enabling the severe blow dealt to Hezbollah and in creating the conditions for the collapse of the Syrian regime. At the decisive moment, the Iranians had no way to assist Hezbollah when Israel struck it (beginning in July 2024), nor did they have the necessary force in Syria to stop the rebels advancing from north to south (in December of that same year). Looking back, the success of the *mabam* in Syria had fateful consequences during the war, beyond the collapse of the land bridge stretching from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to the Mediterranean. The fall of the Syrian regime also facilitated the Israeli Air Force strike in Iran, as it was carried out through Syria and Iraq without any meaningful resistance on its way to the Iranian border.

The *mabamis* an example of an Israeli initiative that was not always met with full consensus and whose full contribution to Israel's security has become clearer only more than a decade after the IDF began implementing it systematically.

Without understanding Iran's efforts over the past forty years and without analyzing both its achievements and its failures during that time, the picture of the war remains incomplete. It seems to me that most analysts and decision-makers in Israel did not fully understand, and perhaps did not internalize, the scale of the axis Iran built or the level of readiness it achieved.

THE WAR IN GAZA

It appears that during 2023, Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's leader, concluded that his organization was already strong enough to attack Israel—thanks in part to Iran's continued support in money, weapons, and training (Hamas operatives were already traveling to Iran for extended training thirty years ago). Moreover, he felt that as part of the axis, he was even stronger in practical terms; he sensed or understood that the axis's plans for a coordinated assault had advanced significantly, which gave him great confidence in the prospects of success.

At the same time, it is possible to infer that by autumn 2023 Sinwar underwent another profound shift in his assessment. On the one hand, he likely feared that coordinating all components of the axis would expose the plan and cost him the element of surprise—something he valued enormously. (Had he correctly assessed the depth of Israel's intelligence penetration of Hezbollah, as revealed in summer and autumn 2024?) On the other hand, he seems to have believed that if he launched an attack even without coordination with the other components of the axis, they would feel compelled to join. The spillover we saw among some Israeli Arabs and West Bank Palestinians during Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021 may also have contributed to this assessment. In any case, it is clear that he chose to execute the multifront, coordinated war the axis had envisioned, hoping it would unfold as planned—but with himself, not the Iranians or Hezbollah, leading the camp.

It is difficult to assess what led Sinwar to this view: Was he afraid the Iranians would never make the decision? Did he want, for religious reasons, a war led by a Sunni actor rather than a Shi'a one? Did he seek personal glory—the chance to be regarded as a modern-day Saladin? Or did rumors of progress in the Saudi normalization track drive him to act? It is also hard to know how far his reading of Israel's internal situation before the war influenced his belief that Israel was weaker at that precise moment. Perhaps he saw a one-time opportunity that could not be missed, although recently exposed documents show that planning for the operation carried out on October 7 had begun long before Israel's domestic crisis intensified.

A noteworthy phenomenon likely occurred in the way each side assessed the balance of power: the IDF on one side and Hamas on the other. After Operation Guardian of the Walls, their perceptions seem to have diverged dramatically, widening the gap between the IDF's understanding and Hamas's, and sharpening each side's contradictory perceptions. Sinwar concluded after senior Israeli officials declared that the operation had successfully hit Hamas's tunnel system, the "metro," as it was called by the IDF, that Israel had completely misread Hamas's tactics, capabilities, and strategy. He interpreted this misreading as a weakness he should amplify and therefore accelerated tunnel construction to provide maximum protection for Hamas's personnel and equipment.

IDF commanders boasted of destroying Hamas's strategic tunnel capability—both through the operation and through the slurry barrier that prevented Hamas from crossing into Israel via attack tunnels. They believed Hamas had been stunned by the blow and would now be more deterred than before. In practice, what the IDF viewed as a success, or at least presented as one, Hamas viewed as an IDF failure rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of reality.

The notion of a "deterred Hamas" may have arisen, or at least become deeply entrenched, based on this misreading.

At the same time, Sinwar, fully cognizant of the IDF's defensive weaknesses along the Gaza border, where only very small forces were deployed, built broad capabilities for a mass assault. Over the years, the IDF allowed Hamas to approach the barrier almost without interference, even though it knew this was the barrier Hamas needed to neutralize. Hamas's intimate familiarity with the barrier convinced Sinwar that his forces could breach it quickly, before the IDF could slow them down. (The well-known principle of defensive warfare that every obstacle requires close protection through observation and fire applied in this case as well, yet it was ignored, along with other professional standards.)

Meanwhile, the IDF was left entirely exposed—its capabilities further diminished by the drawdown of forces over the holiday. The IDF failed to grasp the magnitude of the threat, and to illustrate the consequences of this error: the IDF deployed to the defense line with no artillery at all—not a single field gun was positioned along the Gaza border on October 7. Half the forces along the defensive line had gone on holiday leave, leaving significantly fewer tanks and infantry than usual. (The IDF's order of battle on the Gaza border had not changed for years, including in the weeks before the 2023 Jewish holidays.)

With hindsight, it is clear that despite the initial, impressive success of the operational model he chose, Sinwar made two critical miscalculations.

First, his forces were not as strong as he believed, and the IDF recovered and responded more aggressively and faster than he had anticipated. Much of that response was not organized in advance but was the result of an instinctive, healthy reflex: commanders, soldiers, and civilians "headed toward the sound of the guns," arriving at the front of their own accord and fighting in improvised groups or as individuals. For this reason, by the later morning hours, Hamas was unable to achieve any further meaningful objectives beyond continued killing in the communities and bases it had reached in the opening blow.

All of its gains stemmed from knocking the IDF off balance as a result of the complete surprise with which it had caught the IDF, leaving it stunned for several

hours. Despite the chaos, within 12 to 18 hours, the IDF had re-established a defensive line along the border, and from that moment onward, Hamas achieved no additional gains, and the IDF fought inside Israel to eliminate the remaining Hamas operatives in the Gaza Envelope. (My assessment is that a close review of the timeline will show that all of Hamas's horrific "achievements" occurred between roughly 06:30 and 10:00 a.m., and from that time onward, it failed to advance in any sector.)

Even more critical for the outcome of the war: Hamas failed to drag the axis into the fight. Hezbollah joined only in a very limited way, Iran abandoned Hamas to its fate, West Bank Palestinians and Israeli Arabs remained quiet, and aside from a handful of missiles from Yemen and UAVs from Iraq, Hamas found itself fighting almost alone against the full force of the IDF, although it did divert reserve forces to guard against Hezbollah. Under such a balance of forces, Hamas had no chance of holding off or stopping the IDF.

These two miscalculations may have contributed to the outbreak of the war, but they are also the reason Sinwar's plan ultimately failed.

On the Israeli side, four perspectives seem to have formed the basis of the intelligence community's misreading of the threat on the eve of the war—well before intelligence officers misinterpreted or missed the warning signs on the morning of the attack (a subject I will not address here).

A. On the eve of the war, Israeli intelligence—across all its branches—did not grasp the depth of cooperation within the axis or how strongly its components felt coordinated and close to actual capability to destroy Israel. While some intelligence assessments warned that the axis viewed Israel as weakened because of the domestic crisis in the wake of the judicial reform plan, these warnings lacked concrete indicators regarding timing and location. I deliberately use *warning* and not *alert* because a true alert must include clear dimensions such as time and place. These were absent from the general warnings provided by the various agencies.

B. Israeli intelligence did not understand Hamas's motivations; it did not understand that the organization, or at least its leader, was not seeking to improve Gaza's economy or living conditions, but was driven by an extreme vision of jihad that he sought to implement immediately and practically, not merely as a guiding idea for some future operation.
C. The IDF did not grasp Hamas's level of readiness to carry out a massive, multifront assault involving thousands of fighters simultaneously, nor its willingness to disregard the axis timetable and act alone. The very method of operation surprised the IDF, not merely the timing of the attack on the morning of October 7.
D. As explained above, the IDF did not understand how Hamas perceived its own strength relative to its. The IDF therefore assessed Hamas as deterred—a serious, critical misjudgment.

In light of the broad intelligence failure, it is worth examining whether and how the campaign between wars may have "pulled" the IDF and the Israeli intelligence community away from the classical domains of military analysis: order of battle and force disposition, patterns of activity, doctrine, and training. The *mabam* produced many achievements, but it is possible that its very success weakened Israel's ability to generate early warning—a weakness that revealed itself in full on the morning of October 7, because early warning depends fundamentally on classical research.

In any event, the IDF's surprise at the scale of the attack on the morning of October 7, along with its limited understanding of the quantity and sophistication of Gaza's tunnel network, points to clear deficiencies in collection and research regarding Hamas's military strength and level of readiness. Without such a profound gap between assessment and reality concerning Hamas as a military force, the IDF's failure on the morning of October 7 cannot be understood.

This, then, is how the war began: both sides entered it with a significant misreading of one another, misjudging their adversaries and their strengths.

Israel also failed to grasp the broader axis framework in which Hamas operated and against which it was positioned.

Once the war broke out, it became clear to the Israeli side that this was a profound crisis affecting Israel's future standing in the Middle East and in the world, after Hamas had succeeded in shaking its image of invincibility. Minister Ron Dermer, employing an apt historical metaphor, remarked that on the day the war began "a breach seemed to have opened in the Iron Wall," the metaphorical wall that Jabotinsky had articulated exactly one hundred years earlier and that had held firm through all of Israel's many conflicts before and after statehood. Decision-makers understood that Israel had to wage a war of no compromise, with the goal not only of eliminating Hamas as a military organization capable of harming Israel but also as a governing entity in Gaza in its non-military dimensions.

Israel had to make it clear across the entire Middle East that any actor who transgressed the red lines crossed by Hamas on October 7 would be eliminated as a factor in the regional arena.

At the same time, the cabinet decided to assign the IDF an additional mission: to create the conditions for the release of the hostages taken by Hamas, recognizing that this was a critical issue for Israeli society—even though it was clear that this objective could conflict with the goal of eliminating Hamas as a military organization and governing entity.

Accordingly, on October 11, Prime Minister Netanyahu made the most important decision at the start of the war when he chose not to adopt the recommendation of the General Staff, which, backed by nearly the entire defense establishment and intelligence community, proposed striking a highly valuable and tempting target in Lebanon. No one could guarantee that such a strike would not prompt Hezbollah and Iran to fully and actively participate in the war (in my assessment, the risk of that was high), and the prime minister preferred to avoid the possibility of a full-scale war simultaneously on two

fronts, especially as the IDF was still far from ready for a war with Iran. He therefore decided not to strike in Lebanon, opting instead to continue preparing for full-on combat in Gaza. Some within the defense establishment wanted to postpone the Gaza war and fight it only after a war in Lebanon—and possibly Iran—thereby avoiding simultaneous warfare on two fronts. Those who proposed this did not understand Israel's internal reality or the government's lack of flexibility regarding its public and operational obligation to wage war in Gaza in response to the events of October 7, particularly because roughly 250 hostages were being held there, not in Lebanon.

The prime minister's decision set the war's strategic direction: to confront the enemies surrounding Israel—near and far—one at a time, and to make every effort to avoid intense combat on more than one front simultaneously. This strategy shaped Israel's sequence of actions from October 10, 2023, through to Operation Rising Lion in Iran in June 2025. In my assessment, this was the correct decision.

The Gaza arena is a nightmare for any military professional: an extremely dense urban environment above ground, and an inconceivable number of tunnels below it. These tunnels stretch for hundreds of kilometers, allowing movement from virtually any point to any other, with an enormous number of entrance and exit points carefully concealed within the dense urban landscape. For example, many Hamas commanders had tunnels running from their homes into the tunnel network, and most Hamas command centers were hidden beneath sensitive civilian buildings such as schools, mosques, and hospitals. (A few months after the war began, one of the imagery analysts who mapped Hamas's command-and-control system told me that whenever three such facilities appeared together in a particular area of the Strip, it was a strong indication that a Hamas headquarters lay beneath that triangle.)

The Gaza Strip, which stretches over an area of 365 square kilometers, is home to a civilian population of between 1.5 and 2 million people who are the kin and community of Hamas operatives. Many of them cooperate with the

terrorist organizations (Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad) both passively (for example, families hiding Israeli hostages in private homes) and actively (such as assisting in the transport of weapons using civilian vehicles). Some of the Israeli hostages were hidden among this population, and the IDF had to account for their safety during every operational move. For that reason, there were numerous areas the IDF stayed out of and where it refrained from using fire until the hostages were returned in October 2025.

The combination of densely built urban terrain populated by civilians whose close relatives include terrorist operatives, underlain by an elaborate tunnel system where Israeli hostages were held and hidden, made the Gaza war extraordinarily complex—arguably more complex than almost any other conflict of the modern era.

The IDF had three missions in Gaza:

A. Destroy the military capabilities of the terrorist organizations.
B. Prevent terrorist groups from ruling Gaza in the future.
C. Create conditions for the release of the hostages.

The first phase of the war in the Strip was directed mainly at missions A and C. The IDF achieved significant successes in the first mission, but less so in securing the release of the hostages—although the vast majority were ultimately freed.

Although Hamas held 20 living hostages and 28 bodies right up until the final stages of the fighting, once the first phase was completed—at the end of the war's first year—Hamas ceased to pose a meaningful military threat to Israel. It was no longer capable of mounting a raid into Israel (after Israel regained control of territory during the first day of the war, Hamas failed to infiltrate even a single armed operative), nor could it fire a significant quantity of rockets at Israel. Moreover, by this stage, Israel had almost completely destroyed Hamas's weapons industry in the Strip and had neutralized its ability to smuggle weapons from Egypt.

By August 2025, Hamas had been severely beaten and retained only two remaining cards: the hostage issue—its primary means of exerting pressure on Israeli society—and the global propaganda campaign ("starvation," "genocide"), which worked to its advantage and posed a serious challenge to the Israeli government. Hamas's continued holding of the hostages and the publicizing of their dire condition formed the core of its strategy until the final stage, Operation Gideon Chariots II, during which it became clear to Hamas that the IDF was closing in on it and determined to destroy it in one of its two remaining strongholds—specifically, by capturing Gaza City. Given its situation and the positions of its key supporters, Turkey and Qatar, Hamas was forced to compromise and accept President Trump's proposal, which in its first phase (October 2025) deprived the group of its strongest cards: Hamas was required to return all living hostages, while the IDF remained in roughly 53 percent of the Strip.

In my assessment, the Israeli Air Force strike in Doha, Qatar's capital, in early September also influenced the effort to free the hostages. The United States used that "crazy" operation to signal to Hamas, the Turks, and especially the Qataris that Israel was becoming uncontrollable, and that it would be wise to stop both Israel's escalation across the Middle East and the major operation the IDF was prepared to execute at the time—a large-scale assault to eliminate Hamas's hold on Gaza City.

Following Hamas's acceptance of the Trump Plan and given the support extended to the plan by many important Arab and Muslim countries (such as Turkey and Indonesia), only two options remained for disarming Hamas and preventing it from reasserting civilian control in Gaza. The first option was for Hamas to comply fully with the Trump Plan, under encouragement and pressure from those states, and under the shadow of an Israeli military threat, together with leverage on the issue of reconstruction. The second option was a return to war, including the conquest of Gaza City and the central camps, in order to grind down the organization across every possible dimension.

Only by disarming Hamas and preventing it from reasserting civilian control in Gaza will it (perhaps) be possible to bring a third party into the Strip to take responsibility for the reconstruction of the territory and the provision of civilian services. No such actor will enter Gaza if doing so requires fighting Hamas. Hamas is currently unable to threaten Israel from the Strip; it must be coerced into an even weaker state in which it cannot threaten anyone inside the Strip either. This will be a long and exhausting process, and adverse international reactions can be expected, but it is essential that this happens.

I do not believe it is feasible to induce the emigration of Gaza's residents—among other reasons, because no one is prepared to receive them. At the same time, I do not think it would be wise to build settlements in the Strip; such a move would create unnecessary complications both on the ground and in Israel's foreign relations. In light of the Trump Plan, the IDF will not be required to administer a military government in Gaza during an interim period, sparing Israel a great deal of trouble.

In view of the realities on the ground, it is possible that as an interim stage, only the areas under Israeli control will be rebuilt, while those under Hamas control—including Gaza City—will remain in ruins, with the population there left to the mercy of the terrorist organization. Clearly, this is a temporary and suboptimal situation, but it prevents Hamas from attacking Israel because it is surrounded on all sides. Israel can therefore sustain this situation for a long period until Hamas is exhausted.

The IDF's achievements in Gaza are viewed less positively when compared with what appear to be Israel's major successes in Lebanon and Iran; it is worth highlighting several points that clarify why it was impossible to replicate in Gaza the level of success achieved on other fronts.

In my view, there are four main reasons for this:

A. Ground combat is inherently more complex than the kind of war fought against Iran, which was driven mainly by technology and near-perfect intelligence. This is especially true when ground warfare takes place in densely built urban terrain underlain by vast numbers of tunnels, with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives "mixed" within the civilian population, leaving the IDF unable to reliably distinguish between civilians and combatants during the fighting.
B. In Lebanon, and in principle also in Iran, the IDF faced no restrictions on the use of force beyond adherence to international law. In Gaza, by contrast, the IDF was constrained by the critical need to take into account the hostages held in the Strip.
C. The IDF spent years preparing for war in Lebanon and Iran, whereas it lacked any plan and suffered vast knowledge gaps in intelligence and doctrine regarding combat in Gaza. Prioritizing Israel's two main adversaries was the correct move, but the devastating attack on October 7 forced the IDF to shift its priorities instantaneously, and that shift came at a cost in quality and speed of execution.
D. Gaza has no governing system other than Hamas rule. Therefore, unlike in Lebanon and Iran, there is no responsible body to which authority can be transferred or which can serve as a point of contact after the fighting is over. Without a "day after" solution, it is far more difficult to bring the war to an end. (This is why, for many years, I opposed a major war in Gaza and tried to persuade the government to launch a "preemptive war" in Lebanon instead. In hindsight, I believe a sharp blow to Hezbollah might also have prompted Sinwar to reconsider and perhaps prevented the October 2023 war.)

The IDF entered the Gaza war from an extremely low starting point: after the surprise attack, parts of its command-and-control systems collapsed; it had no updated plan for capturing Gaza; and it lacked an understanding of the requirements of tunnel warfare. After a short preparation period (about two

weeks), the army deployed for war, units were reassigned, and plans were drawn for the initial phases of the campaign—again, without experience or a solid understanding of the problem and its possible solutions. To a large extent, the IDF relied on its superior firepower and on the quality of its commanders and soldiers to find effective solutions to problems that arose during combat. The ground forces underwent a sort of rapid transformation and, for the first time in IDF history, fought in "inter-service cooperation" (close coordination between infantry, armor, and engineering) and "inter-branch cooperation," with many units procuring their own specialized weapons (such as drones) or less specialized equipment (such as vests and helmets) that were lacking because the IDF had not prepared for a war requiring such a massive mobilization of regular and reserve forces.

One of the IDF's major advantages was that, in practice, much of the Air Force operated like an Army Aviation corps — an air arm integrated organically into the ground forces, as is standard in the United States. Although the Air Force encountered no opposition in the Strip and the distances from takeoff to target were extremely short, its rapid adaptation to the needs of ground combat was impressive.

A great deal of technology was integrated into the battlefield — from communications and command systems to precisely directed fire. The IDF fought as a highly technological ground army, relying heavily on close-support fire, especially precision strikes enabled by widespread use of tactical UAVs, and on extensive integration of special forces, particularly in the tunnels. These units developed real expertise in this type of warfare. It was a campaign that made full use of Israel's technological advantages, largely thanks to the reforms introduced by Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi during his tenure (2019–2023).

Beyond the many constraints imposed on the IDF due to American pressure — especially regarding the pace of humanitarian aid deliveries — and delays in major operations, such as the maneuver into Rafah resulting from disagreements with Washington, the fighting itself proceeded slowly. This

was partly due to the heavy use of firepower and partly because forces in Gaza had to fight simultaneously above and below ground, with underground combat progressing slowly (partially because too few units were trained for such complex fighting). Yet the slow pace and extensive firepower may have reduced IDF casualties and likely reduced enemy civilian casualties as well, because civilians had time to leave areas that gradually became combat zones. The need to safeguard the hostages also slowed the campaign, and, as noted, the IDF avoided entering certain areas of the Strip for this reason. These areas became zones from which Hamas continued to operate and within which it could rest and regroup, enabling it to prepare for further fighting beyond these zones.

In my view, because the IDF went to war while still in shock following the events of October 7 — and because commanders and soldiers lacked confidence after so many years without intensive ground combat — the ground forces operated slowly and relied heavily on firepower, partly to compensate for inexperience and diminished confidence. During this period, the use of firepower was not optimal, and the IDF paid a price as the ground campaign dragged on and shortages of munitions for ground forces emerged.

At the outset, the IDF operated against a backdrop of concerns about a major escalation in Lebanon, which is why large forces remained outside the Strip — for example, the 98th Division, which only entered Gaza at a later stage. The absence of these forces was felt in the initial planning, which did not include capturing any significant area in the southern Strip. The IDF's focus on the north may appear, operationally, to have been a mistake, but given the need to be prepared for a serious escalation in Lebanon, it seems in hindsight to have been sound judgment.

To understand the complexity of combat in Gaza, it's important to recall that in many cases there is simply no distinction between civilians and Hamas operatives. The same person can shift roles from one moment to the next — sometimes appearing as an ordinary civilian, sometimes emerging with a

weapon kept at home. In practical terms, it is impossible to visually distinguish between civilians and combatants, and it is no surprise that the IDF often failed to do so. How exactly should one classify a Hamas company commander who eats lunch with his family and then steps into the next room to pick up a Kalashnikov? Or a civilian who walks out in civilian clothes, connects his personal cellphone to a nearby rocket battery, and fires it remotely from his bedroom?

The close presence of civilians alongside Hamas fighters severely complicated IDF operations. It disrupted the use of fire in many cases and prevented the level of aggressiveness that the battlefield required. The IDF allowed civilians to leave combat zones and actively tried to push them away (by dropping leaflets and through other means), while Hamas attempted to make them stay. For Hamas, this was a win-win situation: if many civilians were killed, it gained another token in its public-relations campaign; if Israel refrained from fighting because civilians were nearby, Hamas achieved its goal of undermining the IDF's operational effectiveness. The number of civilians killed in Gaza was the IDF's greatest vulnerability in the Strip, but it was unavoidable. None of those who lectured Israel about the high casualty count — nearly 70,000 according to Hamas, of whom likely 40 percent or more were actual combatants — offered any credible way to fight Hamas without harming civilians. In practice, demanding that Israel avoid harming civilians was equivalent to demanding that it not fight Hamas at all — a demand that is neither moral nor feasible from Israel's perspective.

Looking ahead, it is important to stress that if — even hypothetically — the IDF were to leave Gaza while allowing Hamas to remain in control, the result for Gaza's civilians would be catastrophic. They would remain hostages of Hamas, with no country willing to invest the tens of billions of dollars needed to rebuild the Strip. The population would be dependent on humanitarian supplies that Hamas would routinely divert for its own needs, and the area would resemble Somalia as depicted in the film *Black Hawk Down* — only with devastation on a far greater scale. If Israel were to withdraw before Hamas is eliminated and

focus solely on its security interests, Palestinians who remain in Gaza would face horrific living conditions.

To close the Gaza chapter, a note about the past: in my view — contrary to what some commentators have stated — Israel was right not to declare in advance what it intended to do on "the day after," or who the prospective partners in a process that may not even materialize would be. A declaration of that nature would have created a partner who would constrain Israel's freedom of action — a partner impossible to ignore and certain to have its own interests. Ultimately, the answer to what Gaza will look like and who might take civilian responsibility there depends on whether the United States succeeds in disarming Hamas diplomatically, or whether the IDF will have to do so by force if Washington fails. Until Hamas's capabilities and personnel are fully dismantled, no one will be able to build a meaningful future for Palestinians in Gaza that also ensures Israel's security, and no state or organization will volunteer to take on that task.

THE WAR IN LEBANON

Yahya Sinwar was surely frustrated by how Nasrallah and the Palestinians in the West Bank responded to his October 7 initiative. He had expected the Palestinians in the West Bank, whom he saw as natural allies for the "Al-Aqsa Flood," and Nasrallah, the central figure in the resistance axis after Soleimani's killing, to react very differently. West Bank Palestinians were largely indifferent, and Nasrallah was dragged into the confrontation against his will, entering the events cautiously and doing his best not to take risks. He apparently adopted this approach after consulting with the Iranians, who had no desire to endanger their primary tool for deterring Israel for the sake of a "Palestinian war." That is not why they built Hezbollah, as noted earlier. In my assessment, Nasrallah's realization that Israel had initiated a full reserve mobilization within the first 24 hours — and had already sent significant forces north despite the main effort being in the south — made it clear to him that Hezbollah had completely lost the element of surprise and would face strong resistance if it chose to go to war under those conditions. It is more difficult, in retrospect, to gauge how much the American warning — "Don't" — influenced Hezbollah and Iran.

After several failed attempts by Hezbollah to send Palestinian squads into the Galilee, an informal, unspoken understanding emerged between the IDF and Hezbollah to limit the scope of the battle. Both sides fired at opportunistic targets and military sites roughly 10 kilometers from the border. When tensions spiked, each side occasionally struck deeper or more sensitive sites — but did so cautiously to avoid escalation.

Hezbollah likely took satisfaction in what it viewed as a major achievement: the displacement of roughly 80,000 Israelis within their own country. Israel evacuated many residents from the border area, and many others left on their own due to the dangerous conditions. In Israel, these evacuations resonated strongly, and to some extent this was a Hezbollah success. Conversely, an even greater number of Lebanese civilians, mostly Shiites, were displaced northward from southern Lebanon. Once the IDF shifted to offensive operations in Lebanon, returning Israeli residents to their homes became the central objective of the northern campaign.

Since Israel had decided not to open a second front while fighting in Gaza, it had a clear interest in avoiding escalation — and Hezbollah shared a similar interest. Even so, a gap emerged between how Israel viewed the situation and how Hezbollah perceived it.

For Hezbollah, the loss of the element of surprise and the heavy blows it suffered from the IDF along the border made it clear that escalation carried serious risks. Hezbollah understood that it had much to lose and needed to avoid escalation at almost any cost. The IDF, however, saw this period as an opportunity to prepare for the major confrontation with Hezbollah that decision-makers anticipated would eventually come. It was, in effect, the preparation phase for the larger Lebanon war.

To explain the situation at the time, I coined the phrase: "Hezbollah is ten times stronger than Hamas, but the IDF is a hundred times more prepared for a war in Lebanon than it was for the Gaza war on October 8." The reason

was noted earlier: in the years leading up to the conflict, the IDF prioritized preparations for a war in Lebanon — and to some extent in Iran — far more than for Gaza. Once it became clear during the Gaza fighting that a confrontation with Hezbollah was both necessary and inevitable, the IDF did everything it could to prepare thoroughly. Decades of intelligence capability allowed Israel an exceptionally deep understanding of Hezbollah and its assets, enabling mission-focused efforts ahead of the next stages of the war.

To put this concept into practice, starting around the second or third month of the war, the IDF began operating in Lebanon through four coordinated efforts aimed squarely at preparing for the next stage of the conflict:

A. Delivering major blows to Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force, which was deployed in southern Lebanon. The intent was to weaken it and push it northward, neutralizing the immediate and severe threat to northern Israeli communities and easing the advance of ground forces once they were ordered into Lebanon.
B. Preparing the ground, mainly in southern Lebanon, to neutralize Hezbollah's capabilities and collect precise intelligence in advance of a ground operation—once the decision to invade was made. During these preparatory months, the IDF carried out dozens of "special operations" below Hezbollah's radar, all designed to shape the battle arena in the south and ease the advance of ground forces ready to seize Hezbollah's forward positions. Additional special operations took place deeper in Lebanon and beyond, most notably a commando operation to blow up a weapons-production facility in Syria.
C. Precision operations, led mainly by the Israeli Air Force, to secure absolute superiority and full air control over Lebanon. This included destroying assets tied to Hezbollah's air-defense network, among them surface-to-air missile batteries the group had received from Syria, many of which were relatively new Russian systems that traveled from Russia to Syria and then onward to Hezbollah.

Israel repeatedly warned Moscow that Russian capabilities making their way to Hezbollah posed a serious threat, but the Russians did very little to stop advanced weapons from reaching the terror organization. In some cases, the IDF managed to strike such equipment in Syria before it reached Lebanon. Still, because Israel avoided major operations in Lebanon in the period before the war, Hezbollah retained substantial modern air defenses.

D. Dedicated training exercises built around a Lebanese combat scenario. These drills incorporated lessons from Gaza but focused primarily on the elements essential for fighting in Lebanon. Three-quarters of the brigades that later joined the ground campaign completed such training. As a result, the forces entered their confrontation with Hezbollah in a strong state of readiness and with high confidence. That confidence strengthened unit cohesion and contributed to exceptionally high turnout across the reserve brigades—which formed most of the northern order of battle—even though many units and soldiers had already completed long reserve deployments before entering Lebanon.

Moreover, Israel's intelligence community had for years secretly prepared a series of operations designed to catch Hezbollah off guard and strip away parts of its capabilities. Among other things, the organization was sold advanced radio communications systems rigged with hidden explosives that the IDF could detonate at a moment of its choosing. The original intention was to activate this capability during the war itself, at a decisive moment in the war with Hezbollah. These efforts, too, were accelerated as part of preparations for a broader war in Lebanon. There is no doubt that Northern Command made excellent use of the months in which it was forced to remain on the defensive, enabling the optimal massing of forces in the south ahead of the offensive phase in its sector.

On July 30, 2024, the IDF escalated matters when it eliminated Hezbollah's chief of staff after a rocket fired from Lebanon caused the deaths of a dozen Druze children in the Golan Heights. His elimination was meant to be the opening move in a planned escalation, but because it appeared at the time to

be a response to the children's killing, it did not ignite the front—even though it constituted a major blow to the organization's leadership by taking out its most senior military commander, a figure very close to Nasrallah.

On August 25, the Israeli Air Force launched an intensive strike during which thousands of targets were destroyed, primarily Hezbollah's offensive capabilities—launchers, missiles, and weapons-production infrastructure.

The real inflection point came when, sometime in early to mid-September, Israeli officials began to suspect that Hezbollah operatives were sensing something suspicious about their communications devices. This triggered an urgent "*use it or lose it*" debate. The decision to go ahead was not easy, but in retrospect, its psychological impact proved far greater than anticipated, including on Nasrallah himself, largely because the devices were triggered in broad daylight on the streets of Beirut rather than in the middle of heavy fighting. This was despite the fact that the number of casualties—and certainly fatalities—sustained by Hezbollah in the operation was far lower than planned, since far fewer operatives carried these devices in routine settings compared with periods of intense combat.

By this point, Hamas had already been severely degraded and no longer posed a threat to Israel, making it easier to approve a decision that effectively shifted the full weight of the IDF's effort northward, even at the cost of a significant slowdown in Gaza. The principle of focusing on one main front continued to guide decision-makers throughout.

Israel understood that once the beepers were activated, the war against Hezbollah had to go ahead at full force. This was where the IDF's long preparation became evident: as noted earlier, in every war scenario the IDF practiced, Hezbollah was the centerpiece of the operational effort, and the war plans for a confrontation with Hezbollah were well known and repeatedly drilled. As a result, within an exceptionally short period (between September 17 and 27), nearly all of Hezbollah's senior leadership was eliminated—from

Nasrallah, the organization's secretary-general and the emblematic figure of the Shiite axis in the Middle East, to dozens of commanders at every level. Hezbollah suddenly found itself without most of its operational leadership and without the senior decision-makers above them.

This was compounded by a severe blow to Hezbollah's launch capabilities and missile arsenal—whether it amounted to roughly two-thirds of its total capability or closer to 80 percent, as some claim.

Immediately after the strike on Hezbollah's leadership and launch capabilities, Northern Command's ground forces entered southern Lebanon (on October 1) to clear the area where Radwan special forces had prepared for an invasion of Israel. Because most of the Radwan force had withdrawn after sustaining heavy losses during the earlier limited exchanges between the sides, resistance on the ground was minimal. Still, it was clear that under different circumstances the fighting could have been far more difficult. Once the area was captured, it became evident that Radwan's preparations were extensive, in both the quality and quantity of weapons found. Although the area seized by the IDF extended only a few kilometers north of the border, this was the strongest defensive belt in Hezbollah's array, manned by numerous, well-trained forces designated for offensive operations.

What the IDF encountered on the ground made clear that Hezbollah's forces were far better equipped and more tightly organized than the Hamas units that carried out the October 7 attack a year earlier. In hindsight, had Hezbollah succeeded in surprising the IDF at the same time as Hamas, Israel's situation would have been exponentially worse. It was clear that the IDF was no better prepared to defend the north than it had been in the south, even though it was far more aware of Hezbollah's preparations and capabilities.

After several months of IDF activity and once the area had been cleared, the question arose: what next? Many voices called to expand the zone of operations northward in a campaign extending across the entire area up to and beyond

the Litani River. Israel's overriding interest was restoring calm to the region so it could begin returning the thousands of Israelis who had been evacuated or displaced from the civilian communities along the Lebanese border. Their presence as internally displaced persons inside Israel was, as already noted, Hezbollah's greatest achievement. It was clear that this could not be reversed without inflicting severe damage on Hezbollah and compelling it to abandon its threatening deployment along the border with Israel.

But it was at this point that Hezbollah's weakness was fully exposed: an organization that had absorbed such a decisive blow and been left without leadership simply could not continue the fight. This made it easy for the United States to broker a ceasefire agreement with the Lebanese government that amounted to a clear defeat for Hezbollah. The terms of the agreement made it unmistakably clear that Hezbollah's freedom of action had been sharply curtailed, while the IDF retained the ability to continue striking the organization whenever it violated the agreement. The restrictions were severe: no Hezbollah operatives were permitted to move south, and if they did, Israel would consider them legitimate targets.

As for northern Lebanon, the ceasefire agreement gave Israel the option to submit complaints about Hezbollah violations to a mechanism headed by an American general, and if the Lebanese Armed Forces failed to address them, the IDF was authorized to act. Since the signing of the agreement, the IDF has killed hundreds of Hezbollah operatives and prevented the reconstruction of Hezbollah facilities. The organization has not dared to respond with force even once, a decisive demonstration of its dire situation and fears about the future.

Two years after the Hamas attack, Hezbollah is fighting for its life—both as a terrorist organization and in its status as the dominant armed militia in Lebanon, which it was up until the war. Hezbollah is under pressure from the Lebanese government to disarm (the authorities in Beirut have even begun the process of collecting weapons in Palestinian refugee camps, with PLO assistance, to create conditions that will make it even harder for Hezbollah to

resist the process). The United States and the Saudis are pressuring the Lebanese government, which desperately needs economic aid given the country's state. Hezbollah has been unable to properly compensate its wounded fighters and their families, and it is struggling to assist the residents of southern Lebanon whose homes were destroyed and who were forced to move north because the IDF is currently preventing the reconstruction of Shiite villages in the south.

Israel's achievements in Lebanon are unmistakable. However, as long as Hezbollah still possesses several thousand rockets, continues trying to rebuild with Iranian assistance, seeks to reestablish its presence in the south, and refuses to disarm, the mission remains incomplete.

THE FIGHTING IN IRAN

For many Israeli decision-makers, it was clear from the outset that the head of the snake that struck Israel was in Tehran, even if Sinwar did not coordinate the attack with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Nevertheless, Israel did not rush into a confrontation against a geographically distant adversary, as past experience made it clear that preparing a serious operation against Iran would take a considerable amount of time.

During the first year of the war, Iran twice responded directly from its own territory to IDF operations.

The first time, Israel was surprised by Iran's forceful response when, in April 2024, after the IDF struck a building in Damascus and eliminated part of the senior leadership of the IRGC's Quds Force, Iran carried out a large-scale attack, launching hundreds of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles, claiming that the building was the Iranian consulate in Damascus (no diplomats were killed in the structure, only members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and one Hezbollah operative).

In response to this attack, the United States activated the multinational capability built under the auspices of U.S. Central Command—CENTCOM. British, French, and Jordanian aircraft, together with the Israeli Air Force, repelled the assault, with only a few missiles penetrating the interception and anti-missile array (a combination of Arrow 2 and Arrow 3, along with two U.S. THAAD batteries deployed in Israel).

The Iranian attack was a clear failure. Israel chose to respond by sending a signal to Tehran: a single strike on an S-300 surface-to-air missile battery, making it clear to the Iranians that Israel has the ability to penetrate their dense air defense array.

Half a year later, in October 2024, following the killing of Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran (the Iranians were humiliated as the assassination was carried out at an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps guesthouse) and the killing of Nasrallah together with an Iranian general in Beirut, Iran launched an even more significant strike: roughly 200 ballistic missiles were fired at Israel, some of which struck significant targets, although most were intercepted by Israel's air defense system, as noted, with the assistance of U.S. missile defense batteries.

In both cases, Iran deviated from its familiar rules of conduct, which center on supporting proxies to fight Israel while Iran itself remains outside the conflict, distant and untouchable. That Iranian strategy no longer worked.

Israel did not respond immediately, but on October 26 (Operation Days of Repentance), it struck a series of targets in Iran, demonstrating its ability to hit Iran's air defense system and also to target a site associated with the nuclear program.

However, consistent with its core decision on the correct sequencing of operations, Israel did not launch a campaign in Lebanon until most of Hamas's military capability had been destroyed, nor did it move toward a broad, sustained campaign against Iran while it remained engaged in Lebanon.

At the same time, preparations for a massive operation in Iran were significantly accelerated and went up a further gear beginning in November 2024—partly against the backdrop of indications of increased Iranian activity in the nuclear project.

At this stage, following the heavy blows suffered by Hezbollah and in light of Iran's failures against Israel, countries in the region recognized the weakness of the Iranian axis; this had two practical manifestations:

In November 2024, Iraq instructed all Shiite militias operating under Iran not to attack Israel from Iraqi territory. Since then, no weapons have been fired from Iraq at Israel. The Iraqis "sensed" Iran's weakness, and after it was made clear to them that Iraq would pay the price if Israel were attacked from its soil, they took the hint.

The Turks also understood that a major shift was under way. On the day the ceasefire agreement in Lebanon was signed, November 27, 2024, they instructed Syrian rebels operating under Turkey's protection in northern Syria, in the Idlib area, to begin moving south toward Aleppo. They assumed that, with Hezbollah battered in Lebanon and no longer able to provide support, and with Iran unable to assist because it was preoccupied with its own affairs, the Syrian regime had lost its ability to defend itself against its enemies, the Sunni rebels. By that stage, Russia was already weakened by its prolonged entanglement in Ukraine, and Bashar Assad remained isolated in Damascus.

Turkey's assessment proved highly accurate, and the Syrian regime, which relied on the small Alawite minority (only 12 percent of Syria's population before the civil war), collapsed rapidly and without a fight; within just a few days, the rebels reached Damascus.

Thus, in a single stroke, the "Shiite Crescent," as Jordan's King Abdullah called it, had vanished. The Levant will look different from now on. Without Syria, which has become hostile to Iran, there is no longer a "Crescent" that begins in Iran

and ends on the Mediterranean (Beirut), and no land bridge between Iran and Hezbollah. As a result, Iran will find it difficult to rebuild Hezbollah's military capabilities, especially now that its Syrian neighbor has also become hostile to the Shiite organization, which is now surrounded on all sides by enemies.

From the Israeli perspective, this means that the "Ring of Fire" built by Iran around Israel over the past forty years has collapsed. Iran's proxies in the region—intended to choke Israel while Iran itself remained untouchable at a distance—were dealt severe blows, and Syria exited Iran's operational orbit, likely for many years (its entry into Turkey's sphere of influence is a significant development that merits separate discussion, given Turkey's rising power across the region).

No one in Israel planned the developments in Syria, but once they occurred, Israel responded quickly. In an operation lasting several days, the Israeli Air Force destroyed all key installations and weapons systems of Assad's army to prevent the new regime from rapidly building a military force hostile to Israel. The IDF also expanded its hold in the Golan Heights, from the peak of Mount Hermon southward, to keep any hostile force away from the Israeli Golan, which was annexed by Israel in 1981.

After several months, Israel entered into negotiations with the new regime in Syria, in the spirit of "trust but verify." Israel will shape its policy toward Syria not based on the sweet talk coming from Damascus (the regime knows how to present a smiling face while disavowing its origins in al-Qaeda and ISIS), but according to its actions, including its treatment of Syria's Druze minority, especially around Suwayda, as Israel is committed to safeguarding the lives of Druze in the region. Israel does not intend to support Druze nationalist visions of establishing a Druze state stretching from Lebanon to Jabal al-Druze in Syria, but it will ensure that Druze civilians are not harmed in areas under Syrian rule now dominated by the Sunni majority, which believes that its time has come to settle accounts with the country's various minorities after some fifty years of particularly brutal Alawite minority rule.

After the fall of the Syrian regime, it became clear that the central unanswered question for Israel was what to do about Iran—which had led to the state of war with Israel and whose strategy was explicitly directed toward Israel's destruction. A unique opportunity had now emerged to address that problem.

The new U.S. administration under President Donald Trump demonstrated a clear policy of support for Israel, including lifting the embargo on certain weapons imposed by the Biden administration, which had significantly constrained Israel during the war. It also signaled a willingness to confront Iran, based on the president's unequivocal determination that Iran must not be allowed to obtain a nuclear weapon. At the same time, Syria became a fragile state lacking effective defensive capabilities, effectively creating a flight corridor for the Israeli Air Force over Syria and Iraq that, from a technical standpoint, enables access to Iran without opposition from states along the route.

More importantly, nearly all the deterrent factors Iran had constructed around Israel—Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Syria itself, which Israeli decision-makers had long factored in as forces Israel would have to confront if it attacked Iran—were either severely degraded or no longer existed. The Houthis continued to launch missiles and drones, but their actions produced mainly a nuisance effect: nighttime harassment of the Israeli population and the shutdown of the Port of Eilat.

But in addition to the opportunity that lay on the table, there was also a threat in the form of an acceleration of Iran's nuclear program. During the war, the Iranians took three significant steps to advance their capabilities:

A. A substantive change within Iran's "weaponization group," which had remained dormant for years and whose work was now accelerated in a manner indicating a desire to move more quickly toward the weaponization stage (namely, weapons production).
B. At the same time, the Iranians decided to increase their ballistic missile production capacity, aiming to reach, within two years, a missile stockpile

four times larger than what they possessed on the eve of the war.

C. Moreover, clear signs indicated progress toward the final stage required to make military nuclear capability operational: constructing and being able to place a nuclear warhead on delivery systems available to Iran.

When I served as head of the National Security Council (April 2011–November 2013), I had many opportunities to discuss with my counterpart in Washington, and with counterparts elsewhere in the world, the question that was critical from their perspective—and perhaps even more so from ours: whether and when Israel would strike Iran's nuclear project. I believed this should have been done before the Iranians reached the stage of advanced enrichment. Unfortunately, that stage passed, and as explained above, Israel then focused on thwarting the weaponization stage, even though it is far more difficult to detect and strike.

In my conversations with my American counterpart, I explained in my own words when I believed Israel would reach a decision on the matter: "Every morning we will ask ourselves whether tomorrow will be too late. If the answer is yes, Israel will enter a situation assessment regarding the possibility of a strike. If the answer is no, we move on to the next day and ask the same question again the following morning."

In light of Iran's activity on the nuclear project during the war, Israel's view became that tomorrow may indeed be too late. It therefore decided to go to war with Iran, not only because an opportunity existed but also because it was a vital necessity.

When Israel went to war with Iran in June 2025, it enjoyed the necessary domestic and international legitimacy. The action was easy to justify within Israel, as it was directed against the actor responsible for building the "Ring of Fire" that had struck Israel so severely, both from Gaza and from Lebanon. Moreover, at that point, the operation was undertaken to remove a nuclear threat that was no longer theoretical but rapidly approaching.

Beyond this, it was also a response to two Iranian attacks carried out without any prior overt Israeli strike on Iran. Until that point, Israel had responded to Iranian aggression in a limited and carefully calibrated manner ("*dardaleh*," slang for something trifling or half-hearted, as one Israeli cabinet minister put it).

Israel launched the war—which lasted only twelve days—with a combined operation that took the Iranians completely by surprise, drawing on extensive, highly detailed intelligence accumulated over many years and consisting of three components:

A. The targeted killing of the scientists leading Iran's weaponization group in their homes.
B. The targeted killing of military leaders at various levels in their homes and at their headquarters, based on the operational value of each commander.
C. A broad and significant strike against Iran's national air defense system, which had been built up over many years. The operation was executed unexpectedly, partly through the use of ground forces inside Iran, and by its conclusion, the vast majority of that system had been destroyed (approximately 85 percent of the air defense array Iran possessed at the start of the war).

In the next stage, Israel moved to systematically destroy Iran's ballistic missile production capabilities and its launch capabilities—including the continuous tracking and targeting of mobile launchers by Israeli drones, day and night—and the Iranian nuclear project. Iran's Natanz enrichment facility was severely damaged, its conversion facilities at Isfahan were destroyed, along with centrifuge production centers and the headquarters of the nuclear program, including damage to extensive scientific materials used by the various entities involved.

The United States joined the attack roughly ten days later and inflicted severe damage on the enrichment facility at Fordow, which had been built deep inside a mountain, making it difficult for Israel to strike. The Americans compounded the destruction at Natanz and Isfahan by attacking tunnel entrances where

some of the enriched uranium may have been stored, thereby making clear to Iran that it could not easily advance toward a nuclear weapon.

Even the enriched material that remained in Iran's possession—uranium gas enriched to 60 percent, in a quantity sufficient for five to ten bombs—became of little short-term value, given the destruction of the conversion facilities required to turn enriched gas into metal for weaponization. A decision by Iran to renew the nuclear project would not be an easy one, and rebuilding the necessary infrastructure would require considerable time.

The twelve-day operation against Iran was not a "war" in the conventional sense of the term. It resembled a kind of "computer game," planned down to the finest detail at the operational-design stage, with very little deviation during execution. The arena was isolated, enemies were not visible to the naked eye, and intelligence and technology were the decisive factors for success or failure. There was no mud or sand to contend with, little exposure to heat or cold, and terrain and cover had almost no operational significance, aside from deep underground bunkers. In this case, aircraft flew from Israel and back without encountering any opposition up to the Iranian border and without suffering losses. It was an impressive application of force over long distances—some 1,800 kilometers from Israel—against a country that had spent years preparing for war with Israel. This conflict centered primarily on technology of many different kinds, supported by a limited number of special forces, agents, spies, and high-quality intelligence assets operating throughout the theater.

The extraordinary intelligence available to the IDF, the product of years of sustained and focused work by the intelligence community, enabled planning and execution with almost no surprises. The success of Israeli intelligence in penetrating the Iranian system and recruiting sources inside Iran on a scale previously unseen exposed the system's underlying vulnerabilities. (The quality of intelligence achieved in Lebanon and Iran underscores the intelligence failure in Gaza. In my view, this reflects not only the outcome but also the cause of that failure: Gaza was assigned a low priority within the intelligence community, and the result was accordingly far weaker.)

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF THE WAR

After two years of war, and despite the fact that Hamas and Hezbollah have not been disarmed, it can be said that although Israel still faces serious and complex challenges, the State of Israel achieved very significant gains. In practice, Iran's strategy collapsed across all three of its pillars, the strategy that had shaped the Middle East for the past forty-five years:

1. Iran has lost most of the components of the "Ring of Fire" it built around Israel over recent decades:

   Hezbollah is struggling for its survival in the face of pressure from the Lebanese government to disarm, with active American backing for that pressure. The organization also understands that Israel is strong and capable, and that if given an appropriate pretext, it could strike even harder—perhaps dealing a death blow .

   Hamas in Gaza has been hit hard, and Israel is preparing for its near-total destruction. Palestinian Islamic Jihad is almost nonexistent, and both organizations are preparing for a final confrontation—whether against the power of the IDF or against political strangulation—over their ability to survive as an armed force inside the Strip.

   The Syrian regime, which had been a central component of this ring of fire, no longer exists, and Iran can no longer operate from Syria, which has shifted from a supporter to an adversary from the perspective of Iran and Hezbollah.

   As noted, the militias in Iraq are also no longer active against Israel due to restrictions imposed on them amid serious concern over Israeli strikes on Iraqi assets.

Iran has been left with one remaining component—troubling but of limited significance in terms of its ability to harm Israel: the Houthis in Yemen, who have themselves suffered unprecedented blows.

2. Iran's military nuclear effort suffered an extremely severe blow, both through the destruction of its facilities and the killing of leading scientists in the weaponization field, the most relevant stage at this point. It is difficult to know how the regime will choose to respond to the new situation—whether it will reinvest in new sites and risk another attack or defer its nuclear ambitions to a more distant future. Either way, this is a period of uncertainty, after which it will become clearer where the regime in Tehran is heading (and perhaps whether doubts about its stability will increase in the face of tightening economic sanctions) and whether there is a need to consider an additional strike against Iran.

3. Similar conclusions, albeit with somewhat different emphases, apply to Iran's missile project. It should be recalled, however, that Iran still possessed hundreds of missiles at the end of the June war, and acquiring machinery and materials to rebuild these capabilities is easier than a comparable effort in the nuclear domain. The missile threat therefore remains relevant, although it is likely clear to the Iranians that employing this capability would provoke a severe retaliation from Israel and the United States, exploiting Iran's vulnerabilities.

At this point, it is clear that the Iranian regime faces a very difficult decision. Its strategy has collapsed, international pressure continues (European sanctions were renewed following the activation of the snapback), and its weaknesses are not easily remedied—especially in light of the demonstrated intelligence penetration of its systems. Iran is also suffering from severe domestic problems: its economy is in dire condition, the population is repressed (this year has seen an exceptionally high number of executions in Iran), and its leadership is aging with no alternative vision to replace the one that is now collapsing. The question is, will this dire situation—especially given that it is clear the

regime has failed spectacularly in its foreign policy as well as in managing the economy and domestic affairs—produce internal pressure leading to regime change or a change of course? It is hard to know. The very fact that the regime deludes itself and its citizens (claiming, for example, that its missile barrages killed hundreds in Israel and forced it to surrender…) paradoxically testifies to its awareness of the depth of its failure.

"Regime change" is a complex task and likely beyond Israel's capacity, but Israel can and must act to undermine this regime to ease the path for Iran's citizens should they decide to take their fate into their own hands and confront the corrupt and dysfunctional regime that makes their lives a misery.

WHAT WAS THE WAR FOR?

To conclude the description of the war, it is appropriate to summarize it in broader terms and within a global context. The war, throughout its duration, can be examined from five perspectives or levels of analysis:

A. The personal security of every Israeli in the Gaza Envelope, the Galilee, and across the country. Iran surrounded Israel with a real capability to destroy the nation-state of the Jewish people. Through strategic and cultural blindness, we allowed that capability to take shape. Now Israel must destroy it and ensure that it cannot be rebuilt. The opportunity that has emerged allows Israel to impose change and put an end to the long-standing reality in which, time and again, an actor decides to fire on Israel, and the world, and Israel itself, tolerate it. That pattern must end. No more.

B. The standing of the State of Israel in the region and the world. Israel lost its reputation as an intelligence and military power on the morning of October 7. A deep breach opened in the Iron Wall built by the Jewish people since the days when NILI and HaShomer began constructing it a hundred years ago. "The sharks smelled blood." It is therefore essential

that those who drew Israel's blood be defeated, totally dismembered, and that defeat be clear for all to see. It must be evident to all who seek Israel's harm that crossing red lines, as Hamas did on October 7, or preparing for Israel's destruction, as Iran did, will be met with force without restraint and without deference to the international system, beyond the humanitarian minimum that Israel has always accepted. At the end of the war, the entire Middle Eastern environment must understand that Israel is strong and will stand resolutely and successfully against its enemies, near and far, and that its enemies will be hit without proportion.

C. The hearts and minds of Muslims in the region. The outcome of the war must make clear to the world, especially the Muslim world, that totalitarian Islamist movements such as Hamas bring disaster upon their peoples and their believers. Leaders in Muslim countries near and far from Israel will not admit this publicly, but the lesson matters to them as much as it matters to Israel, perhaps even more. It is therefore no surprise that a significant number of them ask Israel to continue the fighting and eliminate Hamas, even if they express themselves differently in public.

D. At the global level—given Iran's alignment with Russia, China, and North Korea—this is a war between axes, and President Biden of the United States, a product of the Cold War, was the first to grasp this. That is why an American aircraft carrier arrived in the region immediately, even though Israel did not need it, neither for the war in Gaza nor for the war in Lebanon. For the same reason, the Americans had already been building a coalition that, in practice, contributed to intercepting the Iranian response on April 14, 2024. The purpose was to clarify the advantage of Israel, the United States, and their regional allies on one side, over Iran and its allies—Russia, China, and North Korea—on the other. Trump likely understood this as well when he ordered the bombing of Fordow by the U.S. Air Force, fully aware that China, too, was closely monitoring the performance of the B-2.

E. At the broadest ideological level, this is a war that demonstrates the ability of a threatened democratic state to overcome barbaric enemies. It is part of a struggle against worldviews that claim liberal societies cannot fight barbarians and should not do so, because the barbarians are supposedly right in every such conflict, being weak, oppressed, and victims of harsh colonial rule. This is a cognitive war, waged indirectly against those who believe there is neither the possibility nor the justification for fighting to the bitter end against terrorist organizations that enjoy the protection of progressive movements on campuses and in demonstrations in major Western cities.

In many cases around the world, the drivers of actions against Israel stem from antisemitism and from capitulation to Muslim protests in democratic countries that have absorbed large Muslim immigrant populations. However, it must also be acknowledged that, to a considerable extent, the crisis in Israel's relations with several important Western countries, as well as with large liberal constituencies in the United States, arises from the fact that they view the world through a progressive lens while disregarding the security needs of the State of Israel, which is situated in a region that is entirely different historically and geostrategically.

Ironically, some of what strengthens Israel's security posture, its ability to deter enemies, and contributes positively to the struggle over the character of the Muslim world and its attitude toward Israel, works against it in the Western world. Stark images from Gaza, which generate future deterrence in neighboring Arab states and reinforce the lesson that extremism leads to catastrophe, simultaneously fuel anger in the West over Israel's harsh conduct, reflected in the destruction of Gaza and the displacement of large portions of the population into makeshift shelters in dire living conditions that produce highly damaging images.

Fortunately for Israel, decision-makers did not heed the advice or yield to the pressures of progressives overseas and their domestic imitators, beyond the necessary measure of respect for norms that Israel itself accepts, such as preventing the starvation of the civilian population.

In a certain sense, as analyzed by an Israeli writer whose name escapes me (with several additions of my own), "this struggle is larger than Israel and larger than Hamas. It is a struggle over whether evil can be defeated when it employs the most degrading methods to fight liberal and democratic states. It is a struggle that must clarify whether civilized states have a way to defeat barbarism or whether those same barbarians, through barbaric methods of warfare, will gain immunity precisely because of those methods."

Churchill articulated this paradox well when he wrote in 1939:

"The letter of the law must not in supreme emergency obstruct those who are charged with its protection and enforcement. It would not be right or rational that the Aggressor Power should gain one set of advantages by tearing up all laws and another set by sheltering behind the innate respect for law of their opponents. Humanity, rather than legality, must be our guide."

The German chancellor Friedrich Merz noted during the war: "This is the dirty work that Israel is doing for all of us."

In my view, all of this points to the conclusion that Israel's victory in this war is now even more vital, as it is part of a global struggle between dark forces marked by religious extremism or by more or less brutal dictatorial rule and the democratic, liberal world.

AS FOR THE FUTURE

What should Israel focus on after two years of a multi-front war? Once again, we have learned just how vital relations with the United States are. Every effort must be made to strengthen them going forward, despite the difficulties that emerged during the war—primarily on the Democratic side, but also on the Republican side. This must be a constant concern, addressed at the highest level in Israel at all times.

Israel must ensure, preferably in coordination with the United States, that close monitoring of Iran's nuclear project, ballistic missile project, and air defenses continues; it was the neutralization of the latter that was key to striking the first two projects. A wounded animal is dangerous and must be watched closely.

Accordingly, a mechanism must be created to ensure that the United States and Israel know and understand what is happening in Iran, especially in these three domains. Just as important is the need to establish a process for coordinating the responses of the United States and Israel—and potentially other countries—should it become clear that Iran is attempting to rebuild its capabilities. Those responses must encompass diplomatic, economic, and military measures, with both countries calibrating their actions to the severity of the violation and the risks posed by continued Iranian activity. Crucially, the military option must remain immediately available.

The war did not eliminate Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons in the future, despite the severe blow that Israel and the United States dealt to the program. Moreover, the war and its aftermath may actually reinforce Iran's determination to pursue nuclear weapons, driven by the conclusion that they constitute the regime's only true insurance for preserving its survival.

In Lebanon, Israel should assist the United States and the local government in every possible way to achieve Hezbollah's disarmament, including expressing readiness, at the appropriate time, to carry out a gradual withdrawal from the five positions Israel seized inside Lebanon in exchange for tangible progress in dismantling Hezbollah. In any event, Israel must preserve its freedom of military action whenever and wherever it becomes clear that the Lebanese Army is not acting against an emerging threat—both after Hezbollah is disarmed and certainly before that process is completed.

With respect to Syria, Israel must continue to pursue a dual-track approach—engaging the new regime while remaining deeply suspicious of it. Dialogue should continue, and an agreement may even be possible, but Israel must not

hesitate to strike any effort to build a military threat against it anywhere in Syria. At the same time, it must continue to protect the Druze minority in southern Syria, an area of particular importance to Israel, where no hostile force with the potential to threaten Israel or Jordan can be allowed to take root. Clearly defining red lines vis-à-vis Syria and Turkey inside Syria is essential to prevent unnecessary friction and miscalculations that could lead to escalation. The clearer these red lines are, the greater the chances of maintaining a workable coexistence, even in the absence of formal agreements.

In Gaza, Israel's interest is clear and should be framed in negative terms: no force capable of threatening the State of Israel or its citizens can be allowed to emerge in the Gaza Strip in the future, neither near the border nor deep inside Israel.

To that end, Israel will act in the Strip to prevent the emergence of such a threat and will eliminate anyone who attempts to build capabilities that pose a potential danger to Israel. Any activity or asset identified as belonging to terrorist organizations such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or any other terrorist group will be addressed by the State of Israel.

To illustrate what the "day after" would look like: from the IDF's perspective, the Gaza Strip would resemble Area A in Judea and Samaria. That is, no matter who is responsible for civilian governance—and it will not be Hamas, neither de jure nor de facto—the IDF will operate in the territory based on Israel's security considerations.

Put simply and with absolute clarity, this is how Israel must define the "day after": eliminating Hamas means, in practical terms, that just as it is rendered irrelevant as a threat to Israel from Gaza, it must also be rendered irrelevant within Gaza itself.

Israel prefers that this situation be achieved through an agreement that disarms Hamas, sends the small number of remaining commanders into exile, and

establishes the IDF's freedom of action to conduct security operations in an orderly manner, similar to the ceasefire arrangement in Lebanon. In principle, this should be the outcome of the second phase of the Trump plan, but the language there is very general. As a result, a long and complex diplomatic effort will be required—along with close coordination with the U.S. military establishment involved in implementing the plan—to produce a clear text that can serve as a solid basis for real action and practical implementation of these sound ideas.

As for the vision of de-radicalizing Palestinian society in Gaza along the lines of post–World War II Germany and Japan, it is necessary to recognize how difficult such an outcome would be to achieve. It is a noble and compelling vision, one that brings to mind conversations I had with very senior Western officials—including in Washington—during what was known as the "Arab Spring," when hopes were placed in the belief that democracy was taking root in the Arab world. Unlike Germany and Japan, Gaza is embedded in the Arab world and its culture, and those historical precedents therefore offer little guidance regarding the prospects for success in Gaza. The likelihood that whoever governs Gaza could isolate it from the wider Arab world, along the lines of what the ruling family in the United Arab Emirates did to cultivate a non-extremist society, is extremely low. It is true that any genuine attempt at change would have to begin along these lines, but it must be pursued without illusions.

In any case, there are developments that may arise on the "day after"—namely, the implementation of the second phase of the Trump plan—that Israel must oppose resolutely, such as:

A. Israel must oppose the entry of Qatari or Turkish actors into Gaza, despite their role in securing an agreement with Hamas—and certainly any dominant role for them on the ground.

B. Israel must also oppose any arrangement framed as a "Palestinian technocratic government," or any similar formula for governance in

which Hamas has a role. No Hamas figure should be part of governance in Gaza, directly or indirectly.

C. Israel must prevent a "Lebanese-style" situation—namely, a political reality in which a formal authority exists *de jure*, but *de facto* Hamas wields real power, much as Hezbollah did in Lebanon until the end of 2024.

As for the question of the Palestinian Authority moving into Gaza, the Israeli government strongly opposes such a move, given that the PA wages an all-out political campaign against Israel and supports terrorists and their families (in the event that a terrorist is killed) by providing them with lifetime payments.

In my assessment, the damage to Israel from introducing the PA into Gaza would be limited, despite the Authority's corruption, lack of credibility, and inability to manage Gaza's challenges. If this is what the international community insists upon, Israel should not block it, provided that its freedom of security action is fully preserved under any arrangement.

We should have no illusions. The PA will not be able to dismantle Hamas or confront it in day-to-day life. The full security burden will fall on the IDF. The PA could, however, address civilian needs, sparing the IDF from having to establish a military governing apparatus in the Strip.

This would resemble the situation that emerged in Judea and Samaria in the years following Oslo. It is not an ideal arrangement, but it is the least unfavorable option among those under consideration, given the broad desire to rebuild a devastated Gaza.

As for Israel's internal efforts going forward:

During the war, the IDF consumed almost all of the stockpiles at its disposal—spare parts and ammunition of all types. A strict "munitions economy," designed at the General Staff level and maintained with great effort for nearly

the entire duration of the war, enabled the IDF to do the impossible and fight continuously on multiple fronts. Going forward, there must be a drastic increase in the quantities of spare parts and ammunition available to the IDF, and it must be understood that wartime munitions management is an integral part of operational planning.

Much of the IDF's success derived from how it employed the weapons at its disposal and from the fact that Israel possessed certain capabilities and systems that took its enemies by surprise. Most of those advantages, however, have eroded: they are now known to the enemy, whose understanding of them will only deepen over time. Creating the next "generation of surprises" will therefore require new foundations, sustained investment in development, large-scale production capacity, and a protected, modern storage infrastructure. Technology will be the key to future success, as became clear during the war across all major fronts.

Defense requirements along Israel's borders and in Judea and Samaria have become sharply defined. After October 7, there can be no return to "thin lines"—that is, lightly manned border deployments with minimal forces and no organic fire support, reliant primarily on warning and rapid reinforcement—as existed in Gaza, Lebanon, and the Golan Heights on the morning of October 7. The border with Jordan will also be reinforced, as it provides a convenient corridor for weapons smuggling and must be effectively sealed, even if an October 7–style attack from that direction is not anticipated.

Maintaining large forces deployed along the border during routine periods inevitably leaves fewer units available for training, undermining readiness for war. There is therefore no alternative but to expand the IDF—both the regular forces and the reserves. The IDF requires an additional regular division, specifically two infantry brigades and one armored brigade, to carry out these missions. It also needs an additional full heavy reserve division, along with proportional increases in engineering and fire-support units in both the regular and reserve forces, as the ground forces currently lack sufficient fire

support for maneuvering units (including drones). The IDF must be structured to fight on land on more than one front and to sustain wars longer than those it has fought in the past.

At the same time, a sense of proportion must be maintained. Expansion cannot be uncontrolled or economically unsustainable, as it was after the 1973 war. Israel was unable to finance such an oversized force structure then, and it will not be able to do so in the future. Any growth must therefore be carefully planned and rigorously justified. There is no doubt that the manpower shortfall and the question of conscription across the entire Jewish population constitute a critical and highly complex challenge. This is both a political and moral issue, and I will not address possible solutions here, though there is reason to hope that the Hashmonaim Brigade will prove itself and that ultra-Orthodox enlistment will expand significantly. A larger IDF, particularly in the ground forces, is essential for carrying out future defensive and offensive missions.

Beyond expansion, substantial investment will be required in the ground forces, as the logistics of the ground army and some of its combat platforms are outdated and unfit for future wars. They must be replaced with newer and more modern capabilities to close the gap created by many years of neglect in renewing the IDF's ground systems.

An enemy cannot be defeated through defense alone, but a war can be lost by relying solely on defense. The IDF must therefore invest heavily in defensive capabilities—both in systems and in new operational thinking. The IDF needs more interceptors, including smarter, longer-range options. Laser systems must be brought into service and further developed; their value will increase significantly once mounted on aircraft and able to intercept threats at extended ranges from the air. The adversary has identified heavy missiles as its core strength and will continue to improve them both quantitatively and qualitatively. Israel must therefore invest substantially in subterranean infrastructure, relocating below ground all military and civilian facilities essential to the country's and the IDF's continued functioning under fire.

Where this is not feasible, defense must be maximized to the highest possible standard.

In parallel, Israel must continue to develop capabilities to strike launchers and missile stockpiles in order to reduce the enemy's launch potential across various scenarios. Success in doing so, particularly in Lebanon and to a large extent in Iran, contributed significantly to the IDF's operational achievements and to strengthening the public's sense of security. These successes also seem to have bolstered the confidence of decision-makers, as they were built on years of sustained target-generation work within the intelligence community and on the IAF's precision strike capabilities. This combination of capabilities must be meaningfully reinforced moving forward. The substantial investment in intelligence and the Air Force has delivered high-quality results at scale and should be extended to additional arenas—its absence in Gaza was clearly felt.

The Air Force operated a fleet that included a significant number of aging aircraft. In the coming years, a substantial portion of the fighter fleet will need to be replaced with new F-15 and F-35 aircraft. Nearly the entire helicopter fleet will be renewed, and additional aerial refueling aircraft will be procured, having proven to be a critical bottleneck during the operation against Iran. The bulk of U.S. assistance—set to be renewed for the next twenty years—will be directed to the Air Force, funding aircraft acquisitions, spare parts, and a wide range of munitions. A strong, modern Air Force is the cornerstone of the IDF's ability to confront long-range threats in the second and third circles. At the same time, serious consideration should be given to establishing a largely ground-based missile force, which could provide a response to a range of future threats facing Israel.

Taken together, these conclusions on force buildup in light of the war's lessons necessitate a substantial increase in the defense budget, which I assessed even before the war as inadequate to meet Israel's security needs. How to raise the defense budget without damaging the economy is a difficult question with no simple answer, but it is essential for Israel's future.

In conclusion, three important and interconnected observations follow, all sharing a common core: future threats must be identified, and Israel must prepare accordingly.

Given developments on the ground, the absence of overt Israeli opposition, and Washington's active encouragement, it appears increasingly likely that Turkey and Qatar will assume leading roles in Gaza's reconstruction. Egypt and other Gulf states will also likely play a role, backed by active American involvement.

The combination of Turkey's power and neo-imperial ambitions—infused with Islamist ideology in the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood—and Qatar's financial resources, rooted in the same ideological framework, constitutes a dangerous alignment from Israel's perspective. One should recall that both states assisted Hamas to their full capacity, provided sanctuary to its leadership, and defended it internationally. Israel must therefore prevent the involvement of these two countries in shaping Gaza's future. Beyond Gaza, neutralizing Qatar's influence warrants sustained effort in its own right to mitigate future threats advanced globally through Qatari funding—often in a "soft," yet highly dangerous, form.

The central lesson of the war is the need for a profound shift in Israel's strategic worldview: Israel must not, in the future, allow the emergence of threats of exceptional magnitude directed against it—certainly not by terrorist organizations. To that end, the Begin Doctrine must be extended into the conventional realm, with preemptive war recognized as a legitimate and effective instrument.

Israel must understand, and explain to itself and to the world, that there are "necessary wars," and that they must not be entered into only when no alternative remains, when the sword is already pressed against our neck, or once slaughter has begun. Preventing threats while they are still taking shape, or striking them early, even at the cost of a difficult war, would be the proper expression of the core lesson of the past two years and the period that preceded them.

Finally, Israel must look to the future and take into account the possibility of another major round of combat in Lebanon if the Lebanese government fails to disarm Hezbollah, as well as a renewal of war with Iran if the Iranians revert to their ways and attempt to rebuild their nuclear or ballistic missile projects.

In its fight against Hezbollah, Israel chose to target the organization rather than wage war against the Lebanese state. I have always believed this to be the correct approach, as striking Lebanon as a state would not weaken Hezbollah; on the contrary, it could reinforce its legitimacy as Lebanon's defender. This policy should therefore be preserved in the next round—which will come—by maintaining a focused campaign against Hezbollah while avoiding strikes on other Lebanese targets.

During the twelve days of fighting against Iran, Israel likewise focused on striking elements directly tied to the projects it sought to halt, as well as Iran's air-defense array and several regime symbols. That said, in Iran, the next round may require a different conceptual approach, one that expands the target set to include Iran's economy and the elimination of both its military and civilian maritime fleets, with all the implications this entails for target selection.

If the regime proves inflexible in its pursuit of nuclear and missile programs, serious consideration should be given to significantly weakening it through severe damage to the economy—there are effective and relatively uncomplicated means to do so. This would constitute an escalation in the direct confrontation with Iran, but it may be unavoidable.

Israel has achieved substantial gains as a result of a war imposed upon it under exceptionally difficult conditions. Its ability to regroup and sustain a prolonged conflict has been remarkable. The task now is to ensure that none of these achievements are squandered and that some are secured for the long term. Determination will be required.

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